

Headshot

by Const

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Summary: Mindy learns that sometimes, to kill a supervillain, you have to become one.

1. Chapter 1

Headshot takes place directly after Kickass 2

* * *

><p>It's not a crush.<p>

Sure, I get butterflies training with him, and one grappling session can fuel my fantasies for months, but. . .

Okay, it's a crush.

But it's not _just _a crush. He avenged Dad, and he's the only guy who understands both Mindy and Hit Girl, and he's Kickass for fuck's sake. What girl wouldn't go crazy over Kickass?

Anyway, Philadelphia's violent crime rate is almost double New York City's, so that's where I head. I change up my costume that night - ditch the skirt and wig, and spraypaint everything else black. It fucking hurts not to be Hit Girl anymore; Dad made me that identity. But any cop in the US would recognize me in purple.

That's why I'm in Philly when I see the news.

I'm in the back of a motel room that still smells like spray-paint, in the dark, so my laptop screen glows neon. It shows Todd in his stupid yellow wetsuit, except it's mostly brown now from dried blood. He's facedown on the sidewalk surrounded by bits of his brain. I didn't really know Todd, but he was Dave's friend - anyone who wanted to kill Todd might be after Dave too. I scroll through the pictures, and from the angle between the entrance and exit wounds, I guess he's been hit from a rooftop, probably with a high powered sniper rifle. I

grimace.

That's when I scroll up and actually read the title.

Real Life Superheroes Slain after Battle.

Superheroes. Plural.

My fingers race, but they're slippery, fumbling, and I keep having to retype. Remembering Tommy made it home, unlike Todd, but were found dead in costume with their brains blown out.

I search on:

- dead superheroes list
- Kickass news
- Kickass dead?
- Kickass dead after battle?
- Kickass fucknig daed you stupid uselesss fcuking website? -

I get article after article about someone systematically murdering heroes, but nothing about Kickass. He hasn't posted anything on his site. Swearing, I almost search Dave Lizewski without even changing proxies - a blunder Dad would've lectured me for. I jerk to my feet, pacing. _Get it together, Mindy_. Fuck! I go back to my laptop, change proxies, and use a video chat service to call Dave's cell.

The ringtone seems to take forever, and all I can do is stare at the rectangle of moonlight on the carpet, holding my breath.

Finally he picks up, and I let out my breath, slumping against the wall.

"Hey, it's Dave Lizewski. Who's this?"

His voice is the best thing I'd ever heard.

"Dave, it's me."

"Mindy? You're safe!"

"Yeah of course _I'm_ safe, dumb-ass. Just keep your head down until I can get back to New York."

"I thought the cops were after you."

"Who cares about the cops? I'm gonna fucking _flay_ _whoever's_ doing this. Message the other heroes and tell them to make sure their IP addresses are redirected, and if any of them are stupid enough to go out in costume, they deserve what they're gonna get. I'll be there in ninety minutes."

"Okay, I'll see you soon. Stay safe."

I snorted and hung up. I'd like to see these cunts TRY to take me on.

I packed, hopped on my bike, and hit the road. Even under these circumstances, it felt good to go home.

Well, it felt good until a bullet smashed through my brain.

* * *

><p>I'm a believer in short first chapters.

2. Chapter 2

So, what's it like getting shot in the head, you ask? Nothing - that's what it's like. You don't even know you got shot.

I'm riding the interstate, and then I'm waking up where everything smells like rubbing alcohol, and there's this beep on my left - that's my heartbeat. It's all uneven, and then it picks up as I freak out, and I black out.

When I wake up again, I've got time to realize I'm high off my fucking ass. There's gotta be seven pounds of gauze and tape on my head, and another eight on my chest, but I feel like I'm floating. I think I finally understand heroin junkies. I mean, they're still human garbage, but anything that can make me alright with. . . with _whatever_ _happened_ to me is a hell of a drug.

After a while, blobs start moving around me, and I realize they're people and I'm just too drowsy to focus my eyes or something. This one blob comes up and starts shining a light in my eyes and stuff, talking.

"You're lucky to be alive, Jane Doe," she says. "You were shot twice. One bullet grazed your heart, and the other went through your brain. Ninety-five percent of brain injuries from firearms are fatal. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

I get a vague feeling I should be _way_ _more_ pissed about this than I am, but I'm still floating, so I just nod, and _holy fuck_ nodding hurts. I'm _not_ doing that anymore. The blob gets my attention again, and asks me how many fingers she's holding up, so I start trying to focus my eyes. I squint, cross them, whatever I can think of. . . aaany minute now. . . Okay, _now_ I'm pissed. I'm fucking blind? How am I supposed to cut down scum if I'm fucking blind?

But it gets worse. It gets _so_ much worse. I'm mad enough I flip the blob off and ask her how many fingers _I'm_ holding up, but I can't remember the right words. It's like, they're on the tip of my tongue, but all I end up saying is. "Uh, mu, and. . . um," and shit. The blob tells me not to stress myself out - that my heart's damaged, and strenuous exercise or emotion could kill me.

"It's obvious you're used to an athletic lifestyle," the blob says. "You're going to have to find new things to be passionate about now."

I laugh bitterly. Yeah fucking right. The blob might as well have told a gun to become a bowling ball.

"Most patients go through denial," the blob said. "But really, these

kinds of injuries change people. You can't expect to be the same person you were before. You need to come to terms with that to adjust to your new- are you okay? Calm down, just take deep breaths. Irrational anger is normal after a brain injury."

It's not irrational! Who the _fuck_ is she to tell me I can't be athletic? I can't be Hit Girl if I'm not athletic. What the fuck do doctors know about - _fuck!_ Groping, I find the blob's latex hand, yank it toward me, and break her arm. There's screaming. I pounce, wrapping my legs around her as she staggers. Something stings the crook of my left arm. _Fuck, an IV_, I think. There's a crash of falling equipment, and I kick off the blob and land on my feet. The room tilts. My face slams into the floor, red globs dribbling hot from my nose. Just great. Guess my balance is shot too.

My chest throbs. I try to stand, but all the strength drains from my limbs, and I collapse onto the chilly floor, shivering, sweaty. I'm scared to breathe because I think I might start sobbing, and Hit Girl doesn't cry.

Yeah, not my best moment, but fuck off. If you go through what I did and _don't_ go ballistic and cry on the floor, _then_ you can come back and call me a little bitch. Until then, go fuck yourself. Some things are so fucked up that even morphine can't make them okay.

By the time the staff gets everything sorted out, the blob I attacked has been replaced with a new one that stands a hell of a lot farther away from my bed. That's nice. At least I'm still a _little_ intimidating. He explains that while irrational outbursts are normal, he'd appreciate it if I didn't break any more bones.

"You're going to have trouble controlling your impulses," he says, "maybe for a month, or a year, or forever. Your brain can take over for the parts that got destroyed, but it takes time, and I've never heard of a full recovery. I know that's hard to accept, which is why I've scheduled you with your councilor tomorrow."

He starts listing off all the people who are going to work on me - speech therapist, dietitian, neuropsychologist, physical therapist, ophthalmologist. . . apparently I need as much maintenance as a fighter jet now. I zone out. I can't concentrate through all my trembling and sweating. I want to storm a gang hideout - channel all these stupid feelings into violence, like I did when Dad died. The fact that I can't is literally making me sick.

Look, I'm not stupid; I knew Hit Girl would die young. In the real world, you can only get in so many fights before some asshole with a handgun gets a lucky shot. I just never guessed that when Hit Girl bit the dust, she'd leave the rest of me behind.

What am I supposed to be now?

* * *

><p>Me: How should I start my fanfic?

My Brain: inflict head trauma on your favorite character as quickly as possible.

Me: What the fuck, brain?

_My Brain: you don't like it? _

Me: I didn't say that.

3. Chapter 3

Turns out you can spend your whole childhood killing criminals and still learn something new about them everyday. For example, did you know some criminals have influence in hospitals? Cool, right? And did you know that if an unidentified fifteen year old gets shot, and paramedics find her armed to the teeth with unregistered guns, the criminals will get her transferred to their hospital while she's still in a coma? Wow, how interesting!

God I'm so fucked.

I don't learn all that until later though.

What? I can tell the story in whatever order I want. Dad raised me to be Batman, not fucking Shakespeare, and I wouldn't have it any other way. Whoever said the pen's mightier than the sword had obviously never been stabbed.

Anyway, I'm basically a ninety-year-old now. I have a walker, and glasses so thick they make my eyes look the size of golf balls, and a tangle of wires clinging to my chest like a pervy octopus under my hospital gown. They tell me those wires will page a nurse if my heart stops, so I guess if I drop dead they can show up and be like "yep, she's dead alright. The heart monitor was right again!" And if all that didn't make me sound like a granny, you'll be psyched to hear I'm on my way to physical therapy right now.

I'm supposed to use the elevator, but I take the stairs instead, my knuckles white on the handrail as the ground sways under me. The last time I took an elevator was to kill Frank D'Amico, and I'm gonna keep it that way if it kills me. Dad always said choosing an elevator over the stairs shows that a person's given up on their body.

The physical therapy room is the lamest gym ever. Instead of a punching bag, there's a padded chair to practice standing up and sitting down. Instead of a pull up bar, there's some bouncy balls to sit on, and the whole place smells like old people sweating. I find a corner farthest from anyone and start doing crunches, but after thirty, my head's already swimming and I'm out of breath. I keep going. Mindy the frail invalid is not going to happen. I'd rather die from working out too hard. Literally.

"Hey, you," a young woman says. "Are you the Jane Doe from room four-thirty-four?"

I nod and keep going.

"I'm your physical therapist, Lina Haverty. I was just about to go pick you up."

I glare at her. She looks ordinary - nothing to hate about her. I hate her anyway. I hate everything in this prison, god damn it.

"How'd you get down here on your own? They said you got sho-. . . you had some major brain trauma? Would you stop doing crunches?"

I keep doing crunches. Even now, I can kill this bitch with my bare hands, which means she doesn't get to give me orders.

She looks confused. "Can you understand me?"

I nod.

"Oh, okay."

She sits back.

"I was, uh, thinking we could start with some light exercises, kind of like yoga? We need to be gentle with your heart."

At fifty crunches, I switch to push-ups. _One. . . two. . . _I shouldn't even be here. I should be in prison, slitting Ralph D'Amico's throat. _Nine. . . ten. . . _It _was_ Ralph D'Amico who did this to me, right? He's the only one with the resources and the grudge. _eighteen. . . _

That bitch is saying something, but I can't hear her over the rush of blood in my ears and the rasp of my breath. _Twenty four. . . _My chest throbs. Sweat glues my gown to my skin.

_Twenty nine. . . thirty. . . _

The octopus wired to me is beeping.

I should stop. . .

But I can't.

A hundred push-ups - that's all I want - a hundred measly fucking push-ups. If I can't even do that. . .

_Forty. . . forty one. . . _

My arms are trembling. Since when do I tremble at forty push-ups?

_Forty nine. . . _

_Fifty one. . . _

Lina grabs my arm, but I can't feel her hand. I shove her off.

_Fifty two. . . _

_Fifty three. . . _

It hurts so fucking bad. It hurts. . . So. . .

_Fifty. . . four. . . _

. . . The nurses find me soaked and shivering. I won't drag you

through all the scoldings they gave me over the next day, but the word "denial" came up a lot, and one of them thought I'd been trying to kill myself. Honestly, I don't know what I'd been trying to do. My brain's muddled. Bullets will do that to a brain.

I have this sinking feeling, though, like I've proven that no matter how hard I push my limits, I can never go back to the way I was.

I take the elevator now, not the stairs.

* * *

><p>When language starts returning to me, the first phrase I relearn is "superhero news?" which I say to pretty much every nurse, doc, or janitor who visits my room. They tell me Kickass has been seen on the streets, so on the one hand, it's awesome he's alive, but on the other hand what the fuck is he doing on the streets? Is he trying to give me another heart attack?

I frown out the window. Somewhere northeast, over all the shiny buildings of downtown Philly, past a hundred miles of road, Dave needs help, and here I am sitting in bed.

I should use a hospital phone to order him back into hiding. Thanks to my speech therapist, I could probably tell him the whole message now, if he had fifteen minutes to listen to me mumble while I searched for the words, but whenever I think about doing it, my chest gets tight. I don't want him to hear me like this. Besides, I'm starting to think saying sensitive info over hospital phones might not be the greatest idea. I've been down to the first floor a couple times, and there's always five or six ripped dudes hanging around. They're dressed as civilians, but they wear coats big enough to hide weapons, and from the way they prowl around and eyeball everyone who comes in, I'm a thousand percent sure they're guards. It couldn't be more suspicious if there was a mafia sign painted on the hospital. Obviously, I'm planning to escape, but I still need my walker to get down the hall, so, you know, maybe later.

The second phrase I learn is "whose dick do I have to suck to get a hamburger around here?"

I know, impressively long, right? But if my dietitian feeds me one more veggie smoothie, I'll stab him in his goddamn throat. Apparently, anything harder than ice cream could choke me to death because of "dysphagia." Like, I survived a bullet to the head, and he thinks a _hamburger's_ gonna kill me?

Fucking cunt. A knife in the throat's too quick for him.

. . . okay, that _might_ be an overreaction. I wonder if I'm angrier since I got shot. I've been constantly pissed off, but it's not like that's irrational. My life sucks balls right now. I mean, I can't even sleep at night - I just take my walker and wander the halls until I get tired. I'm weak as shit, and I can barely swallow, which makes it a _huge_ pain to gulp down all the pills I'm supposed to take.

But the worst part's gotta be. . . well, this is going to sound stupid, but it's the scar. The day the nurses took all the bandages and shit off my head, I hobbled into the bathroom to check the

mirror. My face was. . . haunting. The fluorescent lights stretched the shadow of my nose all the way to my chin, and hid my eyes in the shadows of my brow. My cheeks were hollower than I remembered, my skin pale. The scar shot from my left temple to the back of my head, bone white and hairless, thick as a snake. I touched it, and found it soft and irritated. I felt sick. It wasn't just ugly (though believe me, it was ugly), it was like someone took all my new weakness and misery, made it into something physical, and stuck it permanently to my head.

Whenever my thoughts get really dark, I find myself touching it.

I'm touching it now. The lights are off for the night, and I'm staring out the window toward New York, thinking about Dave getting shot because I'm not there for him.

There's a footstep behind me.

Pushing my glasses up, I turn to see a killer in the gloom. Okay, I don't really know he's a killer, but something about his eyes tells me he'd be pretty dangerous if he weren't as decrepit as a ninety year old.

I guess that makes two of us.

I wanted to say, "you lost, fogey?" but all I manage is,

"yu, ah, fo- fogey?"

Hey, it's more than I could've said last week. Progress.

The guy smooths his suit, and gives a nod. Half a dozen guys in black file in. One of them's holding a pink belt with the letters HG on the buckle - my belt. I guess they chipped the spraypaint off or something. The guy throws it on my bed.

Hit Girl would've been sweating in this situation. Me, I just look from the belt to the old guy like "so what?" I mean, what's he gonna do, kill me? He'd practically be doing me a favor.

The old guy hands me a pen and pad from his jacket. The pen glitters orange, reflecting city lights outside. It looks like it cost as much as my motorbike.

I start writing, and find it's easier than talking, though I still have to stop and search for a word sometimes.

'You brought six guys to control a girl with brain damage?' I write. 'I'm flattered.'

"I did not survive this long by underestimating threats," he says.

His voice is raspy, and it takes me a moment to realize he'd spoken in Russian.

"You will be glad to know," he says, "that although the D'Amico family would pay handsomely for you, I would rather we make a deal together. Come with me, Ms. Macready. I never discuss business away from my home."

'Oh, suuure,' I write, 'so you investigated me enough to figure out my name, saw the list of all the criminals I killed, and thought. "Yeah, she'd probably make a deal with a criminal like me. The way she eviscerated that other criminal seemed really diplomatic." Fuck off.'

It takes about five minutes to write all that out. When I hold it up, the old guy waves it away.

"Dig deep enough, and we are all criminals," he says. "Too, we all have a bribe or threat that can control us.

I start writing an insult that'll probably get me killed.

That's when he drops his bombshell:

"I can give you the identity of the sniper killing your friends."

* * *

><p>Hey all. I'm writing this partly to work on voice, trying to branch out from my usual, more descriptive style. So thoughts on voice are appreciated. _Oh, and for any of you wondering if Mindy ends up with Dave in this, I haven't decided yet. It could go either way._

4. Chapter 4

Honestly, I'm more at home here in the smooth leather darkness of the limo, surrounded by killers and criminals, than I ever was in my hospital bed. I know that sounds weird. They're crooks. I'm a crook killer. Shouldn't I hate them?

I guess most of the people I "knew" as a kid were my targets, so they feel familiar to me, like the smell of hot chocolate after a mission. And whenever the street lights slant through the tinted glass, I see a scar across the old guy's throat. He's survived being killed, like me.

The driver pulls us through a gate onto a tree-lined driveway, and when the headlights show the mansion, I laugh. With black marble and peaked roofs, it couldn't look more evil if they'd lit it with red floodlights. Actually, that would look awesome. If I ever get a secret base, I'm lighting it purple.

Anyway, the mansion's not even their real base. We stay just long enough to change into street clothes, then walk through a tunnel into a parking garage, where we pile into a beat up minivan and to drive to their actual base, which is a house in the suburbs with an apple tree out front.

One of the thugs opens the limo door, and I get out with my walker. I expect the old guy to follow, but he says, "The real Mr. Eyeshorne is inside," and drives away, leaving me alone. I hobble toward the door. It's nice to be outside again, in jeans and a T shirt instead of that damn hospital gown. If it weren't for the breeze tickling my scar, I'd feel almost normal.

A huge guy in a Hawaiian shirt opens the door - obviously a guard, and jerks his thumb down the hall. I walk into a windowless room lit only by the flicker of a wall to wall TV. Aside from the door I came in, the walls are covered in bookcases, and the only furniture is a black leather sofa shaped like an V, positioned so that whoever sits in the crook of the V faces the screen. On the couch's right branch, an old guy smokes a cigar. He looks like the old guy from the hospital, right down to the scar on his throat, so I guess he's Eyeshorne, and the other guy was his double. On the couch's left branch, a woman five or six years older than me is texting. She glances up, and when she talks, her voice is soft and deep.

"She has arrived," the woman says.

Eyeshorne turns his glare on me. "Come, sit," he rasps. "Mindy, this is Lygaea. Lygaea, Mindy."

I sit in the crook of the sofa, where I can see both of them at once. The TV's showing the battle with the Toxic Mega Cunts, zoomed in on Mother Russia hurling me through a glass table.

"It is cute, the way you killed Katarina with glass," Lygaea says, "but foolish also."

I roll my eyes. Her dress is sleeveless, so I can see she's not exactly Arnold Schwarzenegger under there - probably not even a fighter. I write on my pad, 'Oh yeah? If you're so great, how would you have done it?'

"I would have brought an assault rifle," she says.

Okay, fair point. She doesn't have to act all condescending about it though. Bitch.

"Do not be wroth with me," Lygaea says. "It brings me joy that you killed Katarina in so humiliating a way. She ate my sister in prison. I considered that disrespectful of her."

"uh. . . huh. . . " I say.

The way this woman talks like she's in some kind of trance makes me think she's either high or fucking insane, and I don't smell any drugs.

"Katarina showed me disrespect as well," Eyeshorne rasped. "But her death was nothing on its own. It was the video of the fight that was important. Understand?"

"The D'Amico boy set up cameras," Lygaea said. "He wanted the world to see him slaughter his enemies. Instead, we saw this."

On the TV, I'm slicing Mother Russia to shreds.

"While you were recovering," Eyeshorne says, "this video changed much. Until this, your display after D'Amico killed your father was the best footage of a person fighting in one of these silly costumes. Now, you can watch dozens of fights from this battle, and the Americans are going mad over it. There are hundreds of new "heroes" in every city, even in New York, where Headshot is killing them."

I give them a questioning look.

"The sniper," Lygaea says. "He calls himself Headshot on his website."

I sigh. Another supervillain. Fucking great. I just hope this one can't afford an evil army. Lygaea puts Headshot's site on the TV, and the front page is filled with a selfie of someone in a black tactical helmet with a visor, the lower half of their face covered with a black bandanna. I can't even tell if it's a guy or girl. Night Bitch is leaning on Headshot's shoulder almost like she fell asleep there, except there's a hole through her skull. The caption reads "bagged another mask-fag, lol." I grind my teeth. I never liked Night Bitch, but still. The bio next to the picture reads like something an edgy teen would write after watching the Dark Knight. He even says "I am an agent of chaos," and "I just want to watch the world burn," so not too subtle on the Joker theme.

I write, 'Let's fucking kill him.'

Lygaea grins faintly.

"Yes, well," Eyeshorne mutters. "What is the greatest asset of one of your "superheroes?"

'Guts,' I write.

"Wrong," he says. "It is fame. Kickass could become rich on ad deals. He could sell his autograph. He could get book deals for his autobiographies. Do you see? There is money in your dress-up game now, and that makes it dangerous. But there is a problem, isn't there? With all the new 'superheroes,' how could someone looking to profit become as iconic as Kickass? How does a hero stand out from the crowd?"

"Really ponder it," Lygaea said. "We need to know if your brain still functions."

I scowl at her. It's not exactly a tough question. Obviously the best hero isn't the community service type - he's a crime fighter, and the bigger the bad guys he takes down, the better he is.

That's when it clicks, and I start scribbling.

Headshot's not an "agent of chaos," or whatever - some fake superhero is paying him so that that when the fake hero "defeats Headshot," he'll become mind-blowingly famous. And in order to get really famous, Headshot just needs to kill one more person -

Kickass.

My fists clench. If I weren't a goddamn cripple, I'd go to New York right now, find Headshot, and blow his cocksucking head open. See how he likes it.

'Do you know who's paying him?' I write.

"I do," Eyeshorne says, "and this is where we come to our deal. Headshot is paid by Chief Justice Vasilyev of the highest court in New York. He is an old enemy of mine, and now your enemy too. So.

Let's make a deal."

'Look,' I write, 'even if you can prove what you just said, how the hell am I supposed to kill him? Did you miss the seven-inch scar on my head? The walker? I can't even do a hundred push-ups. Isn't there a real assassin you could hire?'

"I am the real assassin," Lygaea says, "but my family only forgave me recently for beheading my father. If I kill Great Uncle Vasilyev, they will be unhappy with me. I would kill him for fifty million though, even if doing so was the death of me."

"I won't pay it," Eyeshorne says. "Besides, how would you enjoy it dead?"

"Money is holy." Lygaea says. "I believe that after death, the gods judge us on how much money we made."

Okay, she's gotta be high, right? Please tell me she's high.

"Anyway, Mindy," she says, "If you are worried about your weak body, take comfort in this."

She taps some buttons on her phone, and the TV shows Big Daddy slaughtering D'Amico's guys in a warehouse. I grin. It's good to see Dad in action again. I wonder if Lygaea would give me a copy of the video.

"Observe carefully," Lygaea says. "Your father does not run or leap. He expends less energy than one hundred pushups. I can make you a brutal and pragmatic warrior, like your father, if you submit to my teachings."

I scoff. As if she could teach me anything I don't already know. . . but at the same time, my heart rate picks up. To be a killer again - a killer like my father. . .

'What about Headshot's identity?' I write.

Eyeshorne waves it away. "Headshot is only a pawn."

A pawn who's gonna kill Dave.

'Headshot's identity and address or no deal,' I write.

"I cannot allow you to attack Headshot before you heal more," Eyeshorne says.

'Then have Lygaea kill him.'

"What," Lygaea says, "and ruin your motivation? Since you are so eager to murder this man, taking his life can be your reward once you progress far enough."

I grimace. No fucking way am I waiting. Dave could get sniped tomorrow, so that's when I'm going.

'Of course I'm not stupid enough to go before I'm more healed,' I write, 'but I need Headshot's identity to know you guys keep your

promises. I don't trust you as far as I can throw you, and right now I can't throw you at all.'

The pair glance at each other, and Lygaea stretches over to hand me a phone. "The information is in this. I will text you the time of our first training. Until then, work with your physical therapist and meditate on the spiritual nature of taking life."

I nod and get up. I need to get to bed - charge up to pay Headshot back for that bullet in the brain.

For the first time in weeks, I'm looking forward to something.

* * *

><p>Forgive me, father, for I have used exposition. I will atone with action in chapters five and six, which I'll post mad soon.

5. Chapter 5

Double post warning: This was posted immediately after the last chapter, so make sure you don't accidentally miss chapter four, or you'll be hella confused.

* * *

><p>I wake up the next day feeling fucking awesome. Invalid time is over. Today I kick Headshot's ass.<p>

But first, I have three problems.

I slide open the back of my phone, and sure enough, Lygaea put a tracking chip in there. I pull it out and stuff it under my mattress. One problem down.

The second problem is my walker. I _really_ don't want to fight Headshot with it. I mean, I can shoot just fine over a walker, but it'd look _so _uncool.

The third problem is escaping to New York.

I take the elevator to the lame gym and find Lina as she finishes up with a patient. As soon as she glances up, her brow creases with the helpless look she always gets around me.

"Ah, Jane Doe. You're looking. . . energetic today. Th-that's, uh, good! Why don't you start with some stretches? I'll be with you in a minute."

"Yeah. Not. . . happening," I manage to say.

Lina gulps, helps her patient to his walker, and comes over to me.

"Well," she says. "If you're not here for therapy, what can I do for you?"

I hold up my writing pad. 'I'm switching to a cane.'

"Oh, right. But we normally don't change out walking aids without a doctor's-"

I kick my walker away and write, 'I'm not using a walker anymore. You can get me a cane, or I can fall flat on my face - your call.'

She gets me a cane, and hesitantly gives me a few pointers on using it, though she always stops short of touching me, even when I stumble. The cane feels good - sturdy.

That leaves only one problem, and now that I think about it, maybe Lina can solve this one too. I eye her over, and she awkwardly pretends not to notice, watching some of the old people across the room. She's taller than me, a brunette with a round face - not chubby, but she'd need to drop ten pounds of fat and gain twenty of muscle to be any good in a fight. If there's anyone who doesn't look like a mafia informer, it's Lina Haverty. So I figure there's no harm asking.

'You doing anything tonight?' I write.

Her brows shoot up.

'I need a ride to New York,' I write. 'I don't have anything to pay you with up front, but I can give you five hundred once we get there, and five hundred more to keep your mouth shut.'

She glances around. "Um, it's not for a crime, right? I know there are some Russian. . . people around this hospital."

'Do I look like I'm with the mob?'

Her eyes flicker up to my scar.

'The answer's no,' I write. 'I'm not with the Russians. Well, not really. Look, if you want the job, be in the alley south of the hospital at six thirty.'

I start hobbling away, but pause, scribbling. 'Oh, and if you tell anyone, anything, I'll shove this cane so far up your ass it'll come out your mouth.'

* * *

><p>I drop from a second story window into the alley. I didn't think Lina'd show up, but there she is, watching me nervously from a beat-up sedan. I guess she's not as big a pussy as I thought.<p>

I open her door and hold up a paper. 'I'm driving.'

I expect her to protest, but she just scoots over. Her car's a mess of gas receipts and movie ticket stubs, with an air freshener hanging from the rear view. It smells like maple.

I stomp on the gas, and Lina yelps as we screech out of the alley into traffic. For all I know, Dave could be minutes away from getting shot, or there could be a tracking device in my jeans, and Lygaea's suiting up to bring me back - I'm not wasting a second.

I smirk, driving crazy even by my standards. Good riddance, Mindy the Invalid. I'm back in the game.

It's fun to see Lina squirm when we weave through traffic at eighty miles per hour. We're halfway to New York before she's calm enough to talk.

"So, um," she says. "I was wondering if I could maybe ask your advice on something? You seem to know about fighting and things."

I nod. This should be interesting.

"So, my Dad's paraplegic from Vietnam - that's why I went into physical therapy. Anyway, he's a gambler. He got into debt with some thugs, and they've gotten a bit. . . physical about it lately."

"Easy," I say, and run my thumb across my throat.

"Er, you mean. . . kill them? But. . ."

she trails off for the rest of the drive.

It's raining in New York City. I park a block away from safehouse B and tell Lina to stay put before I hobble inside. There's a sleeping bag on the sparring mat, and some boxes of comic books and porn magazines. I guess Dave's living here now, which is good. I don't know how the cops found his dad's place, but it'd be pretty stupid to keep living there.

The room smells like Dave, so I breathe deep through my nose. Kinda weird, I know, but it seems like it's been forever since the good old days when we trained here. Fuck, I miss that guy.

I grab a bullet proof vest and a raincoat to throw over it. There's a suitcase of cash in the closet, so I grab as much as I can stuff in my pockets.

Then comes the fun part: Guns.

First, I pull Dad's old Remington M24 sniper rifle off the wall; It'd be awesome to kill Headshot at his own game. But, in case things get up close and personal, I grab an M4 carbine and a pair of nine millimeters. As an afterthought, I pull two sheets off my writing pad. On one, I write,

'Dave, I'm alive but can't come back right now. Get the fuck off the streets until someone kills Headshot - M. M./H. G.'

And then on another,

'For your little "problem." Remember to wear a mask in case of cameras and gloves for fingerprints. And for fuck's sake, don't forget to turn off the safety.'

I leave the first paper on the floor and give the second to Lina back in the car, along with a thousand bucks and a nine millimeter. I'm sure her reaction was priceless, but I don't have time to enjoy it. Headshot's address is on my phone, and we're on the clock.

The rain hammers on the roof like war drums, accelerating along with my pulse.

We're getting close. The tenements pack close on both sides of the street, so rickety that one grenade would probably knock them down, and the sidewalks look grimy in the headlights.

I park at the end of an alley. This is it.

When I grab the M4 carbine, Lina goes pale.

"I thought you said this wasn't for a crime?"

I give her an innocent look. It's not a crime if they're a bad guy.

I throw the carbine's strap over my shoulder, hide it under my coat, and stuff a nine in my pocket.

"Just try to keep your heart rate down," Lina says. "Okay?"

I hobble to the base of the fire escape and start climbing. The rain makes everything slippery and cold, my breath frosting in the air. I always get the same feeling right before an attack - a burning in my clenched stomach. Weaker people might've called it fear, but to me, it's excitement.

On the fifth floor, I smash a darkened window with my cane and climb in. The room smells like Ramen, the floor sticky under my shoes with some kind of filth it's too dark to see. I unlock the door into the cement hallway. Apartment five nineteen is two doors down. I breathe deep, trying to slow my pulse. My arms are starting to feel weak. Better move fast before it sets in for real.

Pulling out the carbine, I set it to single-shot and blast through the lock, kicking the door open. The chain-lock jerks it to a halt, so I blow it apart, ducking to the side of the door in case of return fire.

Aside from the echoes of my earlier shots, there's no sound.

I steal a peek into the apartment. It's empty. Not just empty of enemies - there's no furniture, no trash, no sign of life at all. My eyes narrow. I'm thinking it's a trap. Still, there's a chance it's Headshot's place, so I've gotta go in. If I want to protect Dave, it's not like I've got any other leads to fall back on.

I pull out my nine and prowl through the apartment. Let me tell you, prowling's tough with a cane. If there are any tripwires, I'm pretty much fucked.

At the back of the apartment, I open a door and shudder as a hot reek washes out, like the stink of a gut wound. There's no one inside, but there's a chair and a desk with a computer on it. The cement floor's covered in blood, dried black, and around the walls, dozens of jars hold the heads of superheroes, every skull gaping with a bullet hole. My stomach lurches with nausea. If Headshot was going for the whole "body part in a jar of formaldehyde" shtick, he forgot the formaldehyde, and the jar's lids. Actually, the lids are all on the floor next to the jars, so he could've closed them if he wanted.

Jesus Christ, did he _like _the smell?

Thankfully, I didn't recognize any of the heads - I guess he didn't always have the luxury of decapitating his victims.

I force myself into the room. Between the computer desk and the wall, the blood's only a few hours old, making a sticking sound underfoot. It's got a print in it, a spot where a guy sat as the blood dried around him. I know it's a guy now because the print of his balls is pretty obvious, and either he's got a really big dick or he was hard as hell when he did this.

I gag, my skin getting clammy. I am _not_ gonna throw up from this. I've seen worse.

Actually, now that I think about it, I have not seen worse.

All around the print, oily razors stick out of the blood, and on the wall, there's bloody finger-painting, done in calligraphy like those medieval bibles, though I _really_ doubt any of this is biblical.

_ 'Killer of men_' it says. '_B__reak the skull. Rupture the brain. Die gracefully - be exalted. Die never - be destroyed. Die too soon - be replaced. The mission's end is death. Rupture the brain. Break the skull. Killer of men. Fail not the father.'_

So I'm thinking Headshot's not in this for money. Just a wild guess.

I boot up the computer. The desktop and taskbar are empty, so I open his browser and check the history. Luckily, his email's already logged in. I glance at the recent messages, and see a conversation between him and Kickass, with Headshot pretending to be an old woman needing help, and Kickass agreeing to meet at nine. I glance at my phone.

It's eight thirty.

Fuck.

I want to dash for the car, but Dad trained me better than that. I hit 'select all' on his emails and forward them to myself, and _then_ I hobble out as fast as I can.

Lina's in the hall. She yelps and points the gun at me, then lowers it when she sees who I am.

"S-sorry," she says. "I heard gunshots and thought you might need help."

Without slowing down, I clap her on her rain-soaked shoulder.

Time to save Kickass.

6. Chapter 6

_Triple release warning: this was released on the same day as chapters 4 and 5, so make sure you get 'em all or you'll be confused

about the plot._

* * *

><p>The problem with saving Dave right now is that I really don't want him to see me like this. Aside from the ugly scar, I dropped a lot of weight in the hospital. It's not even about the looks though. Dave knows me as a god of fighting, blinding fast, overpowering. I can't stand the thought of meeting him now and seeing disappointment in his eyes, or worse, fucking pity.

Before I start driving, I scribble 'call this number and tell him the meeting's a trap,' and hand the paper to Lina.

Then I peel out and start breaking traffic laws like they're gangster's bones. The engine roars as we whip past other cars, their horns whining.

"He's not picking up," Lina says.

"Fuck."

Please tell me he didn't show up early.

I run two red lights, and we're in the industrial sector. Refinery towers spew fire into the sky, giving the rain an orange shimmer.

The streets are empty. All the honest workers are home for the night, leaving only scum creeping out of sight. At a small intersection, I screech to a stop and roll out of the car, taking cover behind it. Like an idiot, Lina starts getting out her side, so I drag her across the driver's seat and pull her behind cover. The meeting place is a block to my left, but I stopped here because just on the other side of our cover, there's a refinery - a tangle of pipes and fire rising high enough to give any sniper a hard-on.

Opening the back door, I pull out the sniper rifle.

Lina's eyes go wide. "Oh, you're having a sniper battle now. You run. . . quite the errands."

I nod, and she huddles closer behind the car, hugging herself. She didn't bring a raincoat, so I think, "fuck it," and give her mine. If anything's gonna kill me tonight, it won't be the cold. Going prone, I crawl so I can see just an edge of the refinery. I stare through the scope at every catwalk, pipe, and shadow, and when I'm sure Headshot's not there, I scoot a fraction of an inch farther, and search the next area. Everything in me screams to hurry up before Dave gets here, but Dad always said a sniper in a rush is just rushing to die.

My teeth chatter. My jeans and T shirt are soaked, and rain streaks down my glasses, making everything tougher to see. I inch forward, and there it is.

From behind a pipe, a rifle barrel sticks out. God fucking damn it, there's no way my bullet will punch through a pipe like that; I can't hit him from here.

I jerk to my feet and hobble with my cane to get a better vantage point, checking right and left out of habit.

In the distance down the street, there's a green figure. I try to scream a warning, but all I hear is the crack of gunfire.

The figure falls.

I stare. The green speck doesn't move.

No. Fuck fuck _fuck _no.

My heart is shuddering. Water blurs my vision, spilling hot onto my cheeks, but I don't have _time_ for this.

Finish the mission, mourn later.

My mouth had opened to sob, but I scream my rage instead. Headshot's FUCKING DEAD.

Raising my scope, I see nothing - he's hiding, but I know which tower he's on now. I drop my aim to the refinery fence and blast the lock off the gate. My ears ring as I hurry across the gravel toward the tower, craning my head to watch for movement.

In the bottom of the tower, there's an industrial elevator, grimy, nearly pitch black. I punch the up button, and the elevator lurches up with a wail like someone getting their skin peeled off. It takes fucking forever. My arms and legs are getting weak, my heart fluttering. I doubt I can aim while shaking this bad.

The doors begin to open, and the first thing I see is the barrel of a rifle. I pull my trigger. Headshot shrieks, and his own bullet whips past my cheek. He drops his gun and runs, his bandanna falling from his face, his right arm dangling. Too slow, bitch. I shoot him in the back. He falls and scrambles behind a pipe.

The doors finish opening onto a network of catwalks between pipes, everything shimmering orange in firelight.

I try to yell, "you're dead you fucking cunt!" but over the deafness from the gunshots, I can't hear if I said it right. I hobble onto the catwalk, stumbling. My chest fucking hurts. Even though I'm dizzy, I keep going, raising my rifle as I step around Headshot's cover, but as soon as I take my cane off the ground to raise my gun, I fall to my knees. Headshot lunges. How the fuck is he still moving? I fire, but he's already past my barrel, his knife flashing toward my face. I fling up my arm to block, slow, weak. Pain splits me from cheekbone to jaw. He's cackling, his blood pouring onto me as he straddles me, raising his knife.

I pull out my nine and unload the clip into his balls and thighs, too weak to lift the gun higher.

He falls off me. Fucking finally.

I try to catch my breath. Even breathing is hard, but the pain in my chest lessens, until something lances into my thigh. I shriek, sitting up. Headshot is pulling himself toward me on his arm, face pale, his knife left behind in my leg. When I lean forward to grab

the knife, he seizes my throat, pulling me down on top of him, clutching my head against his blood-reeking chest.

I snarl, "I. . . f-fucking. . . killed you!"

Something wet slides along my skull, tracing my scar. "I killed you too, Hit Slut."

His fingers tighten, closing my throat.

"I want you to know," he hisses, "that you're dying for nothing."

I rip the knife out of my leg and stab him. He barely flinches.

"You've killed me," he says, "but father will just make another to wear Headshot's mask."

I stab his wrist, twisting the knife. His fingers spasm around my neck, loosening, but not enough to let me breathe. I'm losing strength. My chest throbs again, worse than before, my skin icy with sweat and rain.

Headshot is laughing. "I'm dying with grace."

Apparently, getting your balls shot off is graceful now.

I try to lift the knife, but it's too heavy. Fuck.

Dad's dead, and Dave's dead. I guess it makes sense that I'd die too.

Everything's going black. . .

* * *

><p>I wake up shivering. Headshot's hand is loose around my neck, his skin cold. I roll over to stab him, but he's not breathing - he must've bled out before he could finish me. I want to be furious, to hack him to bits for Dave, but I'm exhausted, and it's all I can do to reach down and put some pressure on my thigh.<p>

Beside me, Headshot's dead mouth gapes, his lips and chin coated in scars, branching like roots. They're not combat scars - I've seen enough to know. They're from torture. Headshot said he'd been _made_, and that whoever made him could make more.

I slump onto the catwalk. I hadn't killed Headshot. If someone else wears his costume and snipes heroes, everyone will believe it's the same guy, and when the fake hero beats him, they'll still get all the fame. They'll get rich off killing Dave.

Yeah, that's not gonna fucking happen.

If I can't kill Headshot, I've just gotta make sure the fake hero can't kill Headshot either.

I pull off Headshot's helmet. In the visor, reflected flames glimmer like yellow eyes, watching me. Slowly, I pull it over my head. It smells sweaty, and the visor presses my glasses against my nose, but

the padding is soft on my scar. The bandanna fell close, so I tie it around my face. Long term, I'm gonna want something that stays on better.

Now all I need is a hero to snipe. Shouldn't be too hard. One or two probably deserve a healthy dose of headshotting, especially since some are just heroes for the fame. Besides, I'm planning to assassinate Chief Justice Vasilyev - that's pretty villainous.

Below, clangs ring from the stairs. Someone's running up. Groaning, I prop myself against a pipe and reload my nine millimeter, holding it out of sight behind my leg. If this is the cops, I'm fucked.

A man leaps up the last steps.

I blink.

It's Kickass.

"Metal helmet, bitch!" he yells, and charges me.

I think my brain's having a joygasm. There's two hundred pounds of muscle and rage bearing down on me, and I'm smiling ear to ear.

Of course, I can't stand the idea of Dave seeing me weak and brain-damaged, so there's no way I'm taking off the helmet.

I aim at his head, and he dives behind cover.

I laugh, delighted. He's gotten faster, and using an armored helmet to counter Headshot is pretty clever.

"You're gonna pay for what you did to Hit Girl and the others, asshole!" he says.

I got first billing on his revenge list! Hell yeah.

The elevator opens, and Lina steps out, her gun wobbling in her hands. I guess she recognized me by my clothes, because when she sees me, she runs over.

"Wait!" Kickass says. "Get away!"

He jumps in front of her, covering her. He's wearing Big Daddy's armor, but still. Balls.

"Excuse me, Kickass" Lina says. "Could you let me by?"

"No, you don't understand," he says. "he's a murderer."

"Yeah, maybe she is," Lina says. "But, well, I don't think she's a bad person. Are you two enemies?"

"Of course!"

Lina hesitates, then presses her gun to his neck, her voice breaking. "W-well then, as her physical therapist, I can't let her get beaten with batons, so just have a seat on that pipe, please."

Holy shit, I'm starting to like this girl. I rack the slide on my nine millimeter, just to make a noise and remind Dave I'm pointing a gun at him too.

For a moment, he looks like he might attack. Then he walks toward the pipe, turns, and dashes around a corner.

Lina half drags, half carries me to the elevator.

"Stairs," I say.

"But your leg. . ."

"Stairs." If we take the elevator, Dave will beat us to the bottom and ambush us.

We make it back to the car without getting a baton through the skull. Lina's driving is jerky, and she's still pale. She keeps repeating that she can't believe she stuck up Kickass. Honestly, I can't believe it either.

"Hey, um, don't get offended, but I just want to make sure," she says, "you're not evil are you?"

"No."

"Promise?"

I write, 'cross my heart, hope to die.'

What, does she think a little bullet through the head could turn me evil?

Like _that _would ever happen.

* * *

><p>We've now completed the opening arc of the story. So, if you'd like, tell me whether it makes you want to read more, whether the first chapters were attention grabbing, etc. In other words, does it function well as a beginning?

Also, sniper bullets don't fuck around. Even two inches of steel helmet (which would be absurdly thick) probably wouldn't save you. We'll have to assume Headshot dealt Dave only a glancing blow.

End
file.